

WRITING ON CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FOR THE MEDIA

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Despite all the hype about child being father of the man, that today's children are tomorrow's leaders and that children are the future of the nation, this section of society continues to be among the most neglected in India. Whether it be their development, their welfare, their education or their leisure, more often than not, it is a case of "full of sound and fury signifying nothing." Children's literature is no exception, as most of you being authors of children's books are well aware. I remember Nilima Sinha, the well-known writer of stories for children, saying at the AWIC Seminar on Better Books for Children, in 1989, how at any cocktail party as soon as she would say that she wrote for children, the oft-repeated response was "Achcha, kutte billi ki kahaniyan likhte hain aap?" (Oh, so you write stories of cats and dogs?) Considering that she is known for her talent in the genre of mystery and adventure, one can quite well imagine her chagrin at such a question.

If writing for children is tough for people to accept, writing on children's literature is usually considered a waste of good journalistic talent. There is no magazine except the AWIC's WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR which deals exclusively with children's literature. In newspapers, which would be the ideal medium for conveying thoughts and ideas on children's literature in view of the large readership they command, articles of this kind are more conspicuous by their absence.

I remember how as a fresh entrant into journalism, armed with a pen and rose-tinted spectacles, I suggested an article on the current scene as far as children's literature was concerned. I was

told in no uncertain terms by the chief reporter, a veteran journalist, to stay away from such frivolous topics if I wanted to become a "serious" journalist. Suitably crushed, my rose-tinted spectacles shattered, I retired to lick my wounded ego in private. It was another two years before I won my cherished aim of writing on children's literature when I got the opportunity to handle a weekly book review column on my own.

A prime example of the apathy towards children's literature in the media is the attitude towards reviews of children's books. The books were not even considered worth mentioning in the book review pages of newspapers. Even when I started reviewing children's books in my weekly "Bookends" column in *The Times of India*, I had to be careful to limit myself to one book. Otherwise, more often than not, the column would be chopped.

The usual reason given was that not many readers were interested in reading about children's books. This seems totally illogical considering most readers of newspapers and magazines are bound to be parents or grandparents or at least aunts and uncles. Don't they have any interest in their children? Considering the number of people who evinced disappointment when my column stopped, this seems difficult to believe.

Now more newspapers have begun to at least talk about children's books. *The Hindu* has quite a few times over the past year carried reviews of new books and even general articles on children's literature and authors. But the genre is so new in this country that the writing is sans any sort of analysis and is usually nothing more than whether

a book is worth buying or not. Also, the books are only from the house of Puffins or HarperCollins, or to give it its new *avatar*, Indus Peacock. Other publishers are usually left unmentioned. I don't know whether this is because publishers fail to send their books to the newspapers and magazines or whether they are not considered important enough by the editors.

But even as authors and the public may decry the lack of good articles or in fact any articles on children's literature, the publishers have to adopt a more visible posture. Promotion of authors, which is a common practice even for children's authors abroad, is in its infancy here. Only HarperCollins does this at present and that this helps as far as attracting media attention is proved by the sales of Swapna Dutta's *Juneli* books, all of which have been sold out. The company is now planning on a sort of relaunch. The number of articles written on the coming in of Puffins India and HarperCollins has also proved the truth of this.

But that media attention alone is not enough is proved by the sale of Dilip M. Salwi's *The Aliens Have Landed* which has received 32 rave reviews so far apart from awards and prizes. But the publisher is still waiting for the crowds to start coming. Why does this happen? Is it that people really do not bother to read about children's literature? Or is it that the culture of going out and buying a good book for a child, even if it is highly recommended, is still to catch on in India?

One way in which the media can be forced to take more notice of children's literature rests with the public - the authors who crib of lack of media attention, the mothers who decry lack of good articles about the books, the publishers who bemoan the failure of newspapers and magazines to review these books. For a few lines to the editor

can really work. But somehow, I don't know why, people seem to find it difficult to pick up a pen and put down the few lines, which believe me, are really worth a million.

However, children's books have been noticed such as Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales* which do, however, transcend the genre of children's fiction, and Madhur Jaffery's *Seasons of Splendor*. But then these authors have all become well known first as either adult authors or in some other fields. So we come back to square one. Their books got attention not because the volumes were children's books but because they had also written such volumes. It is a classic case of which comes first, the chicken or the egg! You need media attention if your books are to really reach the audience you wrote for, and to get media attention you need to be well known among the adult readers and writers.

If the written media is negligent, the less said about the visual media the better. With the entry of satellite television there is some talk of children's books on the idiot box, but they are few and far between, restricted to some programmes for women which are usually shown in the morning when many mothers are in office. Also, there is a tendency to talk about the same books which usually have not yet become available in India. As far as Doordarshan is concerned, they do not seem to even be aware of children's books.

So what is the solution? All that I can suggest is to echo Hamlet's words and say "More things are wrought by prayer than are dreamt of in your philosophy". So pray that newspapers will realise the value of children's literature. But as far as Doordarshan is concerned, I don't think even prayers will work.

*When all else is lost, the future still remains. Children look to the future and brighter days ahead.
Books are the finest sailing ships of the imagination.*